

# DID THE JERUSALEM ELDERS BETRAY PAUL?

© Copyright 2012, by P. W. Baker

I had a professor at seminary who would often pause briefly before starting his lecture to ask a question—posing it, as if thinking aloud—and then moving on without waiting for our response. One morning, as he shuffled his notes at the podium, he asked if we had ever considered that Paul might have been betrayed by the elders of the Jerusalem church when he was arrested on the Temple grounds. The idea had never occurred to me—or any of us. It haunted me until, years later, I came across a paper by A. J. Mattill and was forced to consider the possibility that Paul may have been set up.

While conspiracy theories are built upon facts that do not align with the official consensus of events, in the case of Paul's arrest on the temple mount, all the facts we have are those which Luke has left us—facts about events we assume he witnessed. There are no competing facts to consider. So where is the evidence of a conspiracy? Perhaps within his narrative.

Luke may actually have left traces of other facts—facts he dared not state. He may be deliberately masking the entire truth in order to avoid revealing something that is embarrassing, unpalatable, or controversial—carefully concealing some disturbing truth he intends to convey, or would like to convey, but cannot state outright. Instead, he leaves hints.

## Luke's Portrayal of Paul and His Enemies

Luke paints Paul as an emissary of Messiah on a canvas of clenched fists, shouted accusations, and whispered plots, but he carefully defends Paul right to the end. And, as Paul preaches the gospel, Luke goes to great lengths to contrast the reaction of the Roman powers to that of the Jews. As Ramsay notes, although Paul occasionally encounters the imperial rod, for the most part, Roman power is friendly and protective.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with the centurion Cornelius, Luke portrays amicable relations between the Romans and Christianity, even before Paul becomes a leader in its development. He devotes special at-

tention to the occasions in which Paul is brought into contact with Roman officials. For example, the proconsul of Cyprus is amazed. In Antioch and Lystra he is treated severely, but Luke lays the blame entirely on the Jews. The Philippian praetors treat Paul harshly at first, but publicly apologize and acknowledge his rights. At Corinth, Gallio dismisses the case against Paul and essentially declares religious liberty for the province. The clerk of Ephesus acquits Paul of treasonable designs against the State. The Asiarchs are Paul's friends and carefully secure his safety. Felix, historically a most cunning and corrupt Roman official, is both affected by Paul's teaching and protects him. Festus is described as just and fair towards Paul, and finds no crime worthy of death. The tribune Claudius Lysias and the centurion Julius are both represented as friendly. In short, Luke consistently portrays the Imperial officials as Paul's only safeguard from the Jews. Out of all that might be recorded, Luke selects for emphasis the friendliness of the Roman officials.<sup>2</sup>

But his presentation of the Jews is entirely different. No sooner had Jesus set him apart for ministry than Paul faces a plot against his life by Jews in Damascus. Later, the Jews try to kill him in Jerusalem. On his first missionary journey, the Jews drive Paul and Barnabas out of Pisidian Antioch. In Iconium, Jews and Gentiles together attempt to stone him, then pursue him to Lystra, stir up a crowd, and achieve their goal. When he and Barnabas return to Syrian Antioch, they encounter and debate the Judaizers over the circumcision of Gentiles—an issue which is ultimately settled by the consensus of the Jerusalem Council. On his second missionary journey, at Thessalonica, Paul and Silas endure fanatical Jews who pursue them to Berea. At Corinth, the Jews attempt, but fail, to enlist the power of the Roman governor against him. On his third missionary journey, Paul escapes the mob at Ephesus and then avoids a plot against his life by Jews in Corinth as he makes his way to Jerusalem. Finally, Roman troops end up saving Paul three times from the wrath of fa-

<sup>1</sup>Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, 304-307.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 304-307.

natical Jews: on the temple mount, in the Sanhedrin, and from those plotting to ambush him under a vow.

Luke deliberately selects his details and is guided by a plan.<sup>3</sup> He shows forcefully that Paul's chief enemies were the Jews—both those Jews who claimed the name of Jesus as Messiah and those who rejected it. And when the Jews enlist the help of Gentile crowds, Luke makes it clear the Jews are the source of the agitation; yet he carefully notes those Jews who adhere to Paul. With the exceptions of his extended stays in Corinth and Ephesus, Luke portrays Paul's missionary life as one of continual controversy, turmoil, and fanaticism against him. But his chief opponents are the Jews.

But did this Jewish fanaticism against Paul eventually include the elders of the Jerusalem church? To answer that question we must examine the influence of the Judaizers upon the Corinthian and Galatian congregations near the end of Paul's third missionary journey. It is their influence which holds the key to the fanaticism against Paul and explains how and why it could have finally spread to the Jerusalem elders.

## The Judaizers

The Judaizers were a constant vexation to Paul and he refers to them in disparaging terms.<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem was their party headquarters and their emissaries were dispatched from there to pursue him on his missions.<sup>5</sup> The Judaizers created the earliest division in the church. Their stated goal was to turn converted Gentiles into Jewish proselytes, distinguished from other Jews solely by their recognition of Jesus as Messiah.

Judaizers considered themselves more Jewish than Christian. They believed Messiah was strictly the savior of Israel and that the Jews were a theocratic nation deserving God's exclusive favor. Gentile converts could gain that favor only by becoming Jews. In their imagination, Paul was illegally permitting uncircumcised converts into the congregations. By doing so, he was actually repelling the more numerous Jewish converts who would otherwise have accepted Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

The Judaizers had two absolute requirements for admission to the church: the observance of the Law of Moses and the practice of circumcision. These demands created the dissension

in Antioch<sup>7</sup> and precipitated a pivotal debate. To settle the issue, the congregation at Antioch dispatched emissaries to Jerusalem. Even though Jesus had never formally commissioned any superior governmental body, a spontaneous homage existed early on toward the Twelve and Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> But it is clear that Paul was prepared to disobey the Twelve if they insisted on the Law and circumcision as prerequisites for fellowship.<sup>9</sup> He too had been directly commissioned by Messiah as an apostle to the Gentiles and claimed an authority equal to the Twelve.<sup>10</sup>

By holding a private conference, the elders at Jerusalem were essentially leaving the issue to Paul and the others and excluding themselves from personally working with the Gentiles.<sup>11</sup> They summarized their decision in a letter, which possesses a tone of authority but doesn't make a display of it. No command terms are used. Instead, the letter is essentially advisory in nature and the independence of Antioch is respected.<sup>12</sup>

The Judaizers had not expected the clear unanimity by the Jerusalem elders. The division of labor expressed in the Decree was not at all acceptable, and the Judaizers were not about to give in so easily. Where the Law was at stake, compromise was out of the question. If the Council of Jerusalem had undermined their attempts, they simply altered their tactics. Their revised policy created class division among the congregations. Jewish converts would continue in the Law, while the Gentiles became second-class believers and more distant from the promises. Only circumcision placed a believer in the state of full acceptance by God. Those who were uncircumcised remained "proselytes at the gate" while the circumcised were "proselytes of righteousness."

In short, the Judaizers taught that Christianity without circumcision and the Law was worthless. Christianity was merely a sect of Judaism, and its adherents remained under the Law. Christians were distinguished solely by their belief in Jesus as Messiah. This explains why Paul constantly resisted them and why the Judaizers were determined to destroy his influence in every church he founded or visited.<sup>13</sup>

Paul was the emblem of heresy for the Judaizers. They vilified this "wolf of Benjamin"<sup>14</sup> as

<sup>7</sup>Acts 15:1-2.

<sup>8</sup>Hort, 84.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>10</sup>1 Cor. 9:1-2.

<sup>11</sup>Hort, 89.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>13</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 1:443.

<sup>14</sup>Paul is characterized as such today by Douglas Del Tondo

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 305.

<sup>4</sup>Titus 1:10; Phil. 3:2.

<sup>5</sup>2 Cor. 3:1; Gal. 2:12; Acts 15:1; 21:20.

<sup>6</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 1:442.

an apostate who was attempting to remove the fence and pull up the hedge which protected Israel from a godless world. Their task was made easier because the nucleus of most early Christian congregations consisted of converted Jews and proselytes. Within that nucleus they fed and encouraged Jewish prejudices and simultaneously attributed scandalous accusations to Paul's ministry.<sup>15</sup>

Their emissaries possessed "letters of commendation" and claimed the authority of James.<sup>16</sup> They had created the schism in the church of Antioch; but, when they attempted to promote their system at Corinth, they overreached. Here they could not hope to insist on circumcision. Corinth was too civilized a metropolis and too steeped in Greek feelings and thought to have considered cutting the flesh anything other than a contemptible and barbaric superstition.<sup>17</sup>

### The Attack at Corinth

Despite the cultural deterrents that existed there, various shades of the Judaizing party were at work promoting deep divisions in the church at Corinth. The more moderate Judaizers called themselves followers of Cephas—using his Hebrew name. They probably recited the special promises made to Peter and contrasted him to Paul, an inferior poseur and not "the rock" upon which the church was to be built. They claimed that Paul insisted on celibacy and contrasted him to the "pillars" of Jerusalem and Peter, who were married and traveled with their wives. They denounced Paul as a converted persecutor, and probably reminded the congregation that he had not been one of the Twelve nor even in close fellowship with them. Moreover, he had never personally known Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

A second party surrounded Apollos who found himself an unwitting participant in the Corinthian party spirit. His Alexandrian roots gave him familiarity with Greek philosophy which was the distinguishing mark of the more learned Alexandrian Jews. The group who attached to him extolled reasoning, rhetoric, and philosophic understanding, in contrast to Paul's simple, pedestrian teaching. For the followers of Apollos, Christianity was intellectual activity, rather than a moral life, and not so much a new religion as a new system of philosophy—actually,

Gnosticism at its earliest stage. Apollos was so offended by the events that entangled him that he seems to have refused to return to Corinth.<sup>19</sup>

Also connected to the Judaizing party at Corinth were the "weaker brothers"—converts from Judaism not yet enlightened to comprehend the true liberty in Christ, sensitive from habit and prejudice. Yet they did not join the Judaizing party and Paul accommodates their weaknesses, confident of their further enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

But it was the party which surfaced just prior to Paul's final visit to Corinth which created the most damage and was used most effectively by the Judaizers. This group had become embittered by the congregation's recent submission to Paul. Paul recounts their accusations against him in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12. They apparently charged him with wily designs, probably based on his personal interest in the collection he was raising. They claimed he could not be a true Apostle because he did not demand support from the Churches he founded. They accused him of weakness. They reminded the congregation that Paul was continually threatening without striking, promising without performing, always on his way, but never coming to Corinth. And they claimed he vacillated in his teaching and his practice. Had he not refused circumcision to Titus, yet circumcised Timothy? Had he not claimed to be both a Jew among the Jews and a Gentile among the Gentiles?<sup>21</sup>

This "bitter faction" was probably headed by a Judaizer, who held letters of introduction from members of the Church at Jerusalem and boasted of his pure, Hebrew descent and special connection with Christ himself.<sup>22</sup> Paul flatly calls him a false apostle, a minister of Satan disguised as a minister of righteousness, and hints that his motives were corrupt. Yet this unnamed Judaizer seems to have impressed the congregation by his arrogance and overbearing conduct.<sup>23</sup> His supporters contrasted his confidence with Paul's timidity and compared his rhetoric and commanding appearance with Paul's vernacular speech and insignificant "bodily presence."<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the Judaizers did not instigate all the factions and turmoil at Corinth. Other issues were at work in the congregation. One party seems to have defended and justified fornication, while another rejected the physical resurrection of the dead. Both aberrations arose from Greek

and others, based on Gen. 49:27.

<sup>15</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 1:443.

<sup>16</sup>2 Cor. 3:1; 11:4; Acts 15:24; Gal. 2:12.

<sup>17</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:30.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 1:444.

<sup>19</sup>1 Cor. 16:22.

<sup>20</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:445.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 2:95.

<sup>22</sup>2 Cor. 11:4, 7, 22.

<sup>23</sup>2 Cor. 11:18-20.

<sup>24</sup>1 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 10:10, 16.

philosophy and rationalization; but the Judaizers would have quickly used these additional divisions to their own advantage—especially fornication, which they could cite as the obvious fruit of Paul's concessions and break with the Law.

It is also clear that divisions and heresy were not isolated to Achaia. During the first century, the Church everywhere faced two great errors. One was the exclusive and bigoted tendency of the Judaizers—which was the primary source of danger before Paul's arrest. The other was the philosophic and rationalizing tendency of the Greeks. But, as the Gentile converts became more numerous, the philosophic tendencies became predominant, and the Judaizing tendency contracted to Palestine. Without supernatural influence, the church would have been totally consumed early on, becoming either one more sect of Judaism or another heathen philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

But the schism between the Gentile and Hebrew Christians was in danger of growing under the mischievous influence of the Judaizers. So Paul attempts to combat its influence by teaching that there can be no party spirit in the church under the name of individual teachers. This runs contrary to his fundamental view of a universal church. Foremost in Paul's mind is whether the church would be transformed into a Jewish sect—whether the religion of spirit and of truth would be replaced by the worship of letter and of form.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, Paul always attempts to balance his efforts toward unity and peace among Jew and Gentile. He teaches there is no Jew or Greek in Christ. At the same time, he reminds Gentiles that they have become partakers of the spiritual blessings of the Jew and that their duty is to contribute earthly blessings in thanks.<sup>27</sup> Paul believed nothing would be more likely to remove the prejudice of the Jew than gifts freely given by the heathen convert.<sup>28</sup> He considered these Gentile gifts as a replacement for the imposed annual Temple tax, now being freely given to the true Temple—spiritually represented by the Jerusalem congregation. But Paul also feared these gifts might be rejected, so he sought prayers on his behalf that he might be protected from the disobedient in Judea, and that the his service for Jerusalem might be favorably received.<sup>29</sup>

As is clear from the second letter to Corinth, Paul is careful to circumvent any attempt to accuse him of mercenary motives. He ensures that

every step in the collection is conducted with prudence and delicacy. He instructs the congregation at Corinth to select their own representatives to carry the collection on their behalf. And he reminds them to be careful to do all things properly, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.<sup>30</sup> The congregation in a metropolis like Corinth was probably wealthy, and Paul does not hesitate to foster competition by citing the generosity of the poorer congregations in Macedonia.<sup>31</sup>

Before his final visit to Achaia, Paul sailed from Troas to Philippi, where he anxiously awaited Titus for news of the events in Corinth. There, Titus informed him that the congregation had submitted to him, but a bitter faction had subsequently developed and was in danger of growing at the instigation of the Judaizers. So, Paul dispatches Titus with the second letter to Corinth—this time addressed to surrounding congregations in Achaia as well. The turmoil might have spread beyond Corinth, and Paul was determined to maintain authority against those who despised the commands of Christ delivered by his mouth. He implores them to save him from dealing harshly with them—always preferring to leave his authority doubtful and vulnerable to his adversaries, rather than establish it through punishment.<sup>32</sup>

### The Attack at Galatia

Some days later, on his way to Corinth for his third and final visit, Paul receives word that the Judaizers have been working their same mischief in Galatia, where he had least expected it. While the nucleus of the early congregations had been Jews by birth, the number of Jews living in a remote agricultural district like Galatia could not have been very large. When Paul addresses the Galatians, he assumes that are some among them familiar with the Mosaic Law, but he implies that the majority were converts from heathenism.<sup>33</sup> Even so, this small nucleus of Jews in Galatia provided a fulcrum for the Judaizers, and it is remarkable that the Judaizing emissaries could have gained so great a hold over a congregation consisting mainly of Gentiles. Their success proves not only their unrelenting activity, but also their skill in the arts of persuasion.<sup>34</sup>

In Galatia, as everywhere, the Judaizers

<sup>25</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 1:454.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 2:92, 134.

<sup>27</sup>Rom. 15:27.

<sup>28</sup>2 Cor. 9:12-15.

<sup>29</sup>Rom. 15:30-31.

<sup>30</sup>2 Cor. 8:20, 21.

<sup>31</sup>2 Cor. 8:24; 9:2.

<sup>32</sup>2 Cor. 8:7-9; Conybeare and Howson, 2:131.

<sup>33</sup>Gal. 4:8.

<sup>34</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:134.

sought to reduce Christianity to a sect of Judaism and subordinate the church to the synagogue. And they were determined to destroy Paul in order to achieve their goal. They despised his apparent insignificance. They knew that he had no outward means of enforcing his will. His presence was weak and his speech was contemptible. The Judaizing party at Jerusalem pursued their new tactics with success by carrying the war into Paul's territory, where they would countermand him in the very centre of his influence—the very heart of those Gentile Churches which he had founded.

They used any means necessary to loosen Paul's hold on his converts. Again, as in Corinth, they accused Paul of inconsistency. They claimed he observed the Law among the Jews, yet he persuaded the Gentiles to renounce it.<sup>35</sup> They suggested that his true motive was to keep his converts in subjection and excluded from the privileges of a full covenant with God, which only the circumcised could enjoy.<sup>36</sup> They called him a flatterer who became all things to all men that he might make a party for himself. Above all, they insisted that he falsely represented himself as an apostle of Christ when, in fact, he had not been one of the Twelve and had not received a commission from Jesus. They declared that his teaching was to be received only if it agreed with theirs and was approved by them. They alleged his doctrine was opposed to that of Peter, James, and the other "pillars" and should be ignored.<sup>37</sup>

Using these arguments, the Judaizers succeeded in alienating the Galatian Christians from their spiritual father. Apparently, many in the congregation submitted to circumcision and embraced the party of their new teachers with the same zeal which they had previously shown to Paul.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the rest of the Church fell into agitation and division.

## Paul and the Law

The Judaizers craved the Law. They could not conceive of salvation without it. This perspective was deeply embedded in Judaism. Even John the Baptizer had questioned whether Jesus was actually the Messiah, because he did not appear to be fulfilling the expectations that had been handed down by the prophets. The Jews and John expected a Messiah of the Law—a glorious Warrior Messiah who would restore Israel's

political and religious predominance and establish his eternal Kingdom on the bloody remains of the subdued and ravaged Gentile nations.

Paul was a Pharisee and understood these Messianic expectations, but he also had been taught a mystery—a mystery that put him at odds with Judaism. He understood that the Law entices, but it entices to death. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul points out that the doctrine of the Judaizers destroys the very essence of Christianity, malignantly transforming it from an inward, spiritual life to an outward, ceremonial system.<sup>39</sup> He also contradicts the falsehoods which had been leveled against him, especially by vindicating his title to the Apostolic office—a title he received directly from Christ and exercised independently of the other Apostles.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, we do not know how successful his efforts were against the Judaizers in Galatia or Corinth.

With his third missionary journey now almost complete, Paul was nearing Corinth. From there, he intended to head to Jerusalem for Passover. But he had misgivings about the forthcoming voyage. He knew his Judaizing enemies and feared they had been working against him in Jerusalem. On his way to Corinth, he writes to the congregation in Rome and requests their prayers for his safety in Jerusalem, that he might be protected from those Jews who hated him and be warmly received even by those who disregarded his authority.<sup>41</sup>

But danger still lurked at Corinth. Ever since Gallio had rejected their attempt, the Jews had been irritated by the progress of Christianity. Paul arrives in Corinth and remains there for three months. During that time, we assume he attempted to subdue the bitter party; but whether he was successful, we do not know.

## Paul's Final Journey

As he prepared to leave for Syria, his plan was to board ship eight miles from Corinth at Cenchrea and celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. But he learns of a plot by the Jews against his life. The outline of that plot is easy to construct. Colonial Jews routinely chartered ships to ferry groups to the festivals in Jerusalem, putting into various ports along the way to pick up additional pilgrims. Paul and his companions probably intended to board such a chartered ship carrying Achaian and Asian Jews to the Passover. Aboard, with a shipload of hostile Jews, it would

<sup>35</sup>Gal. 5:11.

<sup>36</sup>Gal. 2:17; 4:16.

<sup>37</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:134.

<sup>38</sup>Gal. 4:14,15.

<sup>39</sup>Gal. 5:1-6.

<sup>40</sup>Gal. 2:6-9.

<sup>41</sup>Rom 15:31.

have been easy to murder and dispose of him. To thwart the plot, Paul changed his plans and left for Macedonia, either by ship or on foot, where he arrived in time to celebrate the Passover in Philippi.<sup>42</sup>

Luke notes that Paul's travelling companions were Sopater, a native of Beroea, Aristarchus and Secundus, both of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy. In addition, Tychicus and Trophimus, from the province of Asia, had been his companions, probably since he last left Ephesus. Since no delegate from Achaia is mentioned, it seems that the congregation at Corinth had asked Paul to personally convey their contribution on their behalf.<sup>43</sup>

But why would the Corinthians ask Paul to ferry the contribution on their behalf? Paul had ordered them to select their own delegates, just as the other congregations were doing.<sup>44</sup> Was this an orchestration when the plot was hatched to ensure that Paul would be with the party on the ship? Feigning contrition and renewed allegiance, a few conspirators could have passionately insisted and persuaded the congregation that Paul should be their delegate—thus ensuring that he was on board.

After the plot was discovered and Paul changed his plans, someone carried or sent news ahead to Jerusalem that the apostate was on his way with the Gentile contribution. Communication and travel was easy throughout the empire and there was plenty of time to prepare for another attempt on his life before he arrived. We know that Jews from Asia arrived in time to recognize Paul on the temple mount.<sup>45</sup>

Paul attached great importance to the contribution being ferried to Jerusalem by the delegates. He was determined to conduct the delegates himself, in spite of the danger.<sup>46</sup> It was his crowning achievement in four provinces. As is clear from Acts 20:25 and Romans 15:23-24, after completing his mission, he intended to go to Rome and Spain, and take a break from his work in the Eastern provinces.<sup>47</sup> The Jewish and Jewish-Christian opposition had destroyed any hope of successful work in the East.

He expresses anxiety about the journey and fears that the collection will be refused.<sup>48</sup> The plot at Cenchrea had forced him to change his route. He knew that events did not bode well for a reconciliation. Paul was going up to

Jerusalem prepared for the worst. Given all that had happened, Paul could have realistically concluded that the agreement of Galatians 2:10 was now broken by the Jewish-Christian hostility.<sup>49</sup> Whether he actually concluded this, we do not know.

After Paul and his companions arrived at Philippi, Paul and Luke remained there while the others crossed over to Troas. Luke and Paul joined them after Passover. Luke notes that the group boarded a ship a week later for Syria, but Paul decided to walk south alone and board the ship when it put in at Assos.<sup>50</sup> Using merchant vessels or coasters for the trip, the group sailed along beautiful coasts in the fairest weather, but Paul's mind was occupied with foreboding.

At Philippi, no hint is given of coming calamities, but the midnight meeting in Troas is ominously interrupted when death suddenly appears among those assembled in the upper chamber. At Miletus, Paul states that in every city the Spirit has warned him that bonds and imprisonment await, and it is clear that he anticipates evil. He looks forward, sadly but calmly, to some imprisonment not far distant. On landing at Tyre, the first sounds he hears are an echo of his own thoughts. The same voice of warning, the same bitter trial for himself and his friends, greets him.<sup>51</sup> He remains for several days and then departs. Luke's portrait of Paul and the congregation praying on the beach is excruciatingly sad.

When they arrive in Caesarea, the party has plenty of time to reach Jerusalem before Pentecost. Caesarea was the last Hellenist congregation on the way to Jerusalem. The group accepts the kindness of their host Philip, a Hellenist, and possibly the first to see that Stephen's principles required the admission of all men to the church apart from the Law. But here forebodings of captivity are made clear. The disciples, and no doubt Philip's prophesying daughters, warned Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem, where the prevailing mood was clearly against Paul and what he represented.<sup>52</sup> Agabus pantomimes a prophecy, indicating that Paul could not rely on any help from Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He had just arrived from Jerusalem and, no doubt, related the prevalent conviction that Paul was teaching apostasy from the Law.<sup>53</sup>

Paul has one last struggle with those whom he loves and departs. As he approaches Jerusalem, he is full of emotion. He has experienced the

<sup>42</sup>Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, 264.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>44</sup>1 Cor. 16:3.

<sup>45</sup>Acts 21:27.

<sup>46</sup>Acts 20:22-23.

<sup>47</sup>Ramsay, 288.

<sup>48</sup>Rom. 15:30, 31; Mattill, 116.

<sup>49</sup>Mattill, 115.

<sup>50</sup>Acts 20:5-6, 13-14.

<sup>51</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:236.

<sup>52</sup>Acts 21:4, 9; Mattill, 115.

<sup>53</sup>Acts 21:10-12, 21.

progress of error and the sinfulness of the converted, yet his trust did not depend on the faithfulness of man. He goes to Jerusalem calmly and resolutely, doubtful of his reception among the Christian brethren and not knowing what would happen next.<sup>54</sup>

The journey of sixty-four miles from Caesarea to Jerusalem was performed in two days and likely on horseback.<sup>55</sup> Some of the brothers from Caesarea accompany the party as far as a village on the road, where they stay the night with Mnason of Cyprus, one of the earliest Christian converts. The brothers in Mnason's house receive Paul's party with gladness.<sup>56</sup> The next day the brothers from Caesarea depart, while Paul and company complete the journey on foot. As these Macedonian and Asian delegates come in sight of Jerusalem, they are approaching a church divided by a great crevasse.

### Jerusalem and the Arrest

The composition of the Jerusalem congregation was similar to that at Corinth. The faction of Pharisees was sheltered in its center and continually strove to turn Christianity into a sect of Judaism. This faction was the source of the emissaries to the Gentile Churches and they were behind the attempt to alienate Paul's converts from him. These were restless agitators, prompted by the bitterest sectarian spirit, and although they were in number a small party, they were a turbulent minority.

Also at Jerusalem was a large party of believers whose faith was weak and imperfect. Many knew Messiah only as the Savior of Israel. Their minds were in a state of transition between the Law and the Gospel, and it was important not to shock their prejudices too rudely and cause them to renounce Christianity altogether. James accommodated their prejudices in requirements of the law and, by doing this, he disarmed the hostility of the Judaizing bigots.

On earlier occasions, when the church of Jerusalem figures in Paul's letters or Luke's narrative, the apostles, or some of them, play a leading part. Now they are conspicuously absent. James and the elders glorify God that the Gentiles are converting, but Luke relates how the Judaizers had carefully and falsely instructed the Jewish Christians about Paul, through incessant repetition.<sup>57</sup>

The elders of the Jerusalem congregation tell Paul that the majority of the Hebrew-Christians had been taught to hate his name. They considered him an apostate. Many members of the church, described as "zealots for the law," disapproved of Paul's missionary policy and of the freedom with which he treated the law and traditions of Israel. It was bad enough that he should so resolutely refuse to impose the law and the traditions on his Gentile converts, but it was actually rumored that he advised the Jewish Christians of the dispersion to quit observing their customs. They believed that Paul traveled through the provinces teaching the Jews to abandon the Law and telling them that they ought not to circumcise their children or follow the Jewish customs.<sup>58</sup> Although an exaggeration, there was some truth to these claims.

James and the other elders may not have believed the rumors, but it was easy to see what gave rise to them, even if they were distortions. Some people cannot readily distinguish between the essential and the non-essential. Paul's policy was that truly emancipated souls are not in bondage even to their emancipation. Paul conformed to the customs or departed from them, according to the company in which he found himself from time to time. His supreme consideration was the interests of the gospel.<sup>59</sup> Certainly Paul would have agreed that an emancipated Jew in Christ was no longer bound to obey the ceremonial law, so long as his conscience permitted, and he would not have encouraged him to continue in it for the sake of tradition alone.

Since Luke does not mention the Jerusalem decree after Paul's second missionary journey, this suggests that Paul had decided to teach those mandates by other means.<sup>60</sup> But the elders and James were probably uninformed about Paul's increasing reservations about the decree—especially the food restrictions. The disciples at Jerusalem had only limited contact with Gentiles. Paul, on the other hand, had traveled widely among the Gentiles, was familiar with their culture, and was quick to realize that the food restrictions laid down by the Jerusalem decree could not be imposed unilaterally. He knew, even if Jerusalem had forgotten, that Jesus declared no food was impure or contaminated in itself.<sup>61</sup> Paul was completely emancipated with respect to food.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, he was also anxious not to upset the scrupulous and eager to facilitate fellowship between Jew

<sup>54</sup>Conybeare and Howson, 2:236.

<sup>55</sup>Ramsay, 301.

<sup>56</sup>Acts 21:17.

<sup>57</sup>Acts 21:21.

<sup>58</sup>Acts 21:23.

<sup>59</sup>Bruce, 270.

<sup>60</sup>Hort, 93-94.

<sup>61</sup>Mk. 7:19.

<sup>62</sup>Rom. 14:14.

and Gentile.

The leaders of the Jerusalem church would not have been pleased by his libertarian attitude. James and the others would have disapproved of Jewish Christians who voluntarily discontinued the customs. They believed they had made all the concessions that were called for. They had exempted Gentile Christians from circumcision and stipulated a certain minimum of “necessary things” which they should observe. James was in fact abiding by that agreement when he wrote his letter to the Jews of the Diaspora.<sup>63</sup> They now remind Paul of the concessions, perhaps to reassure him that they had no thought of imposing any additional customs on his Gentile converts.<sup>64</sup>

But the Jerusalem leaders could not risk any outward show of support for Paul.<sup>65</sup> That would be a tacit approval his position on the Law and would destroy the possibility of their mission among Jews. James and the others had risked their own destruction at the hands of Jews, who would not tolerate any preaching of freedom from the Law. And many Jews resented Paul’s diversion of annual Temple tax for the collection for the Jerusalem church—money that would rightfully have come to the Temple, had Paul compelled Gentiles to become proselytes and obligated them to pay the Temple tax.<sup>66</sup>

The elders tell Paul that it is impossible that his arrival will remain unknown. His very appearance in the streets of Jerusalem would attract a crowd, most of whom would be violently hostile to him. It was essential that Paul do something to disarm this hostility, and refute the calumnies which been circulated concerning him. So, they present a scheme which seems to have been concocted before Paul’s arrival. James and the elders virtually order him to perform a rite of purification.<sup>67</sup> But Paul now faces a serious dilemma. If he submits to the demand, he will be compromised in the eyes of his Gentile converts. If he refuses, he will alienate the thousands of Jewish Christians zealous for the Law and provide further evidence of his apostasy.<sup>68</sup>

Given the circumstances, and the recent events at both Corinth and Galatia, it is incredible that Paul agreed to such a contrived attempt to pacify the Judaizers. Did he honestly believe that a report of this hypocrisy would not make its way to those churches? Paul had before him a perfect opportunity to correct the misrepresen-

tations of his teaching, to stand on his own apostolic authority and commission before those “pillars” with whom he had so stridently claimed equality. Instead, he submits to the demand of James and the elders, providing one more instance of his inconsistency for his enemies to seize upon.

The prophetic events unfold. While in the temple area, the Asian Jews recognize him. He is surrounded and pummeled, and saved from certain destruction by the Romans. Mattill proposes that, as Luke watched the riot in the Temple, he realized that the Judaizers had drawn Paul into an ambush, which indicated that the Jerusalem elders had decided against Paul concerning the Law, thus reversing their earlier decision.<sup>69</sup>

## The Evidence

We recall that Luke deliberately selects his details and is guided by a plan. He consistently portrays the Jews as Paul’s enemies, yet he emphasizes the friendliness of the Roman officials and those Jews who adhere to Paul. Significantly, he says nothing about any kindness shown to Paul by James and the elders.<sup>70</sup> This is no accident.

If we are honest, our rejection of complicity, collusion, or conspiracy by the Jerusalem elders and James is primarily based on emotion. We naturally recoil from the idea that the elders could have permitted, let alone gone along with, a plan to rid the world of Paul. But it is the inclusion of James, the Lord’s brother, which makes the conjecture doubly abhorrent. While we might be willing, if pressed, to concede that the elders acted apart from James, we find it inconceivable that James could have been aware of the plot and done nothing to thwart it. Surely, he would never have thrown in with the others.

But this view of James—the impeccable saint, not subject to ecclesiastical pragmatism or rationalization—is a Medieval relic. And it is totally unrealistic. That James was Jesus’ brother (or, more accurately, cousin) gave him no spiritual superiority. There was no nimbus over his head. James was no more impeccable than any other disciple, now or then. Christians over the millennia have committed imposture, rationalized sinful behavior, and failed to act to prevent wrong or alleviate suffering. The Church and its leaders have proved more than capable of the most horrendous and heinous sin. The history of

<sup>63</sup>Hort, p. 89.

<sup>64</sup>Acts 21:25; Bruce, 270.

<sup>65</sup>Mattill, 116.

<sup>66</sup>Mattill, 115.

<sup>67</sup>Acts 21:22-25.

<sup>68</sup>Mattill, 115.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ramsay, 306.



Christianity is littered with all sorts of evil committed in an attempt to cleanse or improve conditions in the Church and in the world. We do it today. It is fantastically dishonest and unhistorical to believe that practical, worldly solutions to political and religious dissension originated in the Church only after the original apostles were all dead.

There was a strong incentive for James and the elders to at least permit Paul's arrest. Most Jews and Hebrew Christians in Judea and the provinces considered Paul an apostate, and this was a reasonable conclusion. From their perspective, he was an impediment to evangelizing the Jew and a constant source of instability in the colonial synagogues. Paul brought trouble, dissent, turmoil, and division with him, wherever he went. In that respect, Tertullus was absolutely correct.<sup>71</sup> Paul was a pest to the tranquility of the empire, the church, and Jews everywhere. It is easy to see that the Jerusalem elders could believe it best for all if Paul and his influence were eliminated. They could defend their decision as both reasonable and prudent. In politics and religion, the ends often justify the means.

An argument from silence is fallacious; yet silence in a chronicle—and in everyday life—can be as revealing as what is stated. Did the elders and James know of a conspiracy against Paul and permit it to happen? To be sure, Luke does not state it in those words. But the conjecture that they did goes a long way to explain the unmistakable tension at the meeting, the ham handed scheme, and the problematic events that follow. Just as he portrays the Jews and Judaizers as Paul's true enemies, it is significant that Luke gives no indication that this august body did anything to assist him after his arrest. These men had placed Paul in harm's way, yet made no attempt to defend him before the irate Jews or the Roman officials. By their absence and silence, Luke implies that James and the elders were, at least, content with Paul's confinement.

That James and the elders came to Paul's defense in some unrecorded way seems unlikely, for Luke is a careful historian. Instead—making their absence even more pronounced—Luke introduces Paul's nephew, who appears dramatically and suddenly, with information that keeps Paul safe in Roman hands.<sup>72</sup> Even more astounding, for the next two years, the Jerusalem elders never appear before Felix or Festus to defend Paul.

If Ramsey is correct,<sup>73</sup> and Luke intended to write a sequel to Acts, he might well have intended to expand on the events surrounding Paul's arrest. If that is the case, and there were efforts which exonerated the elders and James, the conjecture of a conspiracy obviously fails. But all the facts we have are those we have before us.

Luke has no problem painting the Jews and Judaizers generally as Paul's enemies, but he may have had second thoughts about deliberately exposing the treachery of the Jerusalem elders and their unwillingness to defend Paul. As he composes Acts in his effort to defend Paul, Luke cannot bring himself to disclose the entire, sordid truth. The true event is therefore concealed because it is embarrassing, unpalatable, and controversial.

Perhaps Paul wanted it that way. Perhaps it was no longer important that he had been betrayed and left on his own without defenders. His feelings may have been akin to those he had later in Rome, when he hopes that those who failed him will not be judged for it.<sup>74</sup> Paul was content because he knew whom he served and to whom he belonged, even if his enemies did not—and this, perhaps, an important lesson for us.

Paul's removal provided an occasion of peace for the Jerusalem congregation and the Judaizers throughout the empire, just as his departure for Tarsus had done decades earlier.<sup>75</sup> The Judaizers were free to spread their corruption of the gospel wherever it could take root. Ultimately, of course, their efforts failed. The appointed destruction of the Temple rendered both Judaism and the Judaizers completely desolate. That judgment was final and Paul's presentation of the gospel of grace, the true gospel, was mercifully preserved for all time.

## References

- [1] Bruce, F. F. *St. Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.
- [2] Conybeare, W. J. and Howson, J. S. *The Life, Times, and Travels of St. Paul*. 2 volumes in 1. New York: E. B. Treat and Co., 1869.
- [3] Hort, Fenton John Anthony. *The Christian Ecclesia*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1897.
- [4] Mattill, A. J. "The Purpose of Acts: Schneck-enburger Reconsidered" in *Apostolic His-*

<sup>71</sup>Acts 24:5.

<sup>72</sup>Acts 23:16-35.

<sup>73</sup>Ramsey, *Luke the Physician*, 27.

<sup>74</sup>2 Tim. 3:16.

<sup>75</sup>Acts 9:31.

*tory and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce.* Edited by W.Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin. Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970.

- [5] Ramsay, W. M. *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904.
- [6] \_\_\_\_\_, *Luke the Physician and Other Studies in the History of Religion.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908

P. W. Baker is the author of *Doomed Edifice: The Eclipse of the Prophetic Ministry and the Spiritual Captivity of the Church*, published by Wipf and Stock.